

BORGES ON THE BORDER

In his study entitled *Interpretation and History*¹ Umberto Eco tries to model those interpretation strategies which might provide different variations of knowledge to be acquired about the world by means of separable ways of thinking. He assumes three mental attitudes that have determined possible relationships to things since antiquity up to nowadays.

According to Eco the first determinant model of this kind is the canonised world view of Greek rationalism, which is primarily characterized by the desire to understand causes, and which as a consequence endeavours to observe the world as a chain of casual connections. By way of this desire the universe becomes the actor of a linear story, in which things and phenomena are separated irreversibly, and where the constraint of logical choice based on the principle of *tertium non datur* requires the unconditional respect of borders (and through it that of identity). Latin syntax is also based on this logic, and so is that dominant trend of western philosophy which may judge rather aggressively all mental products based on any logic different from this to be irrational, that is, impossible.

Similarly, Eco derives another interpretative position from the Greek, which is called hermetic by him, and which — coming from the characteristics of Hermes, the person it was named after — denies the principle of identity and unambiguity, rejects the possibility of the exclusion of the middle course, and invalidates borders in time and space. This syncretic assumption undermines the truth-concept of the rationalist model in its basis, for „it is possible to many things to be true at the same time, even if they contradict each other”², which possibility reveals a hectic mistrust in the one and only truth. On the other hand — Eco says — if everything may be considered to be true, underlying the ideas and principles apparently contradicting each other there must be a common secret, which becomes accessible only if we regard the language signs to be metaphors and symbols. Consequently every text (the universe is also regarded as

¹ In *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

² *Ibid*, 31.

one) is refined into a puzzle waiting to be solved, and through the seeking of the ultimate secret (the Meaning) everything becomes connected to everything by the means of an infinite flow of meaning. The followers of this way of thinking are Neo-Platonists, later on Goethe, Schelling, Heidegger and Jung, while nowadays the texts of Foucault, Barthes and Derrida may be considered to be the representatives of this hermetic tradition. In Eco's interpretation the third possible version of thinking lives upon the Gnosis, which assumes the desire for the ever disappearing truth to be the basic problem of human existence. The gnostic longing for the absolute truth feels himself to be an exile, a captive locked up in the prison of the human body, who by means of his metarational, intuitive knowledge in inspired moments is able to mediate divine revelations to his fellow humans, who are in fact despised by him due to his chosenness. Eco explores gnostic roots in theoretical and practical endeavours for mental experience through sexual, narcotic or verbal deliriums, in almost every manifestation of German/Romantics, and also in the works of Heidegger, Bataille, and even in those of Lukács and Lenin.

I think this study of Eco's partly provides an explanation for a problem which involuntarily props up when interpreting Borges-texts — that is, the questions referring to the Argentine writer's mental identity. Partly, because on the one hand it is doubtless that Borges' world of texts under the influence of the intellectual trends and authors called hermetic-gnostic by Eco paves the way for some of theses of our great hermetics — Barthes, Blanchot, Todorov — by functioning as a mirror, on the basis of which we could easily classify him to an adequate point of this canon. On the other hand we should bear in mind the fact that the theories quoted by Borges in the majority of cases do not appear in the text based on their name value, rather they question their own existence by going through certain modifications of meaning depending on the context.

The metaphysical guest-texts which intertwine in Borges' writings enter into a dialogue with each other within the individual works, the consequence of which process is the fact that a polemic relationship is established between them, that is they correct, reinterpret and deny each other, and in this way the absolute truth-relevance of thought becomes questioned. This may support a reading in which Borges would regard the theories often cited by him mere constructions of speech, each of which is believable, justifiable, but at the same time they are equally confutable, that is, they by no means might be considered to be the verbal imprints of some

transcendent sphere, rather they should be regarded as temporary constructions generated by various language games. This kind of reading spectacularly diminishes popular theories about the hermetic Borges endeavouring to explore the Secret Meaning, for the idea of language as an instrument obviously excludes the mystic assumption of a truth conception beyond language. On the other hand I do not think that the possibility of the formation of a par excellence pragmatic Borges-vision would consequently follow from these but I do believe that in most of Borges' texts a relativistic, ironic and pragmatic line may be discovered, the disregard of which would simplify the writer to a late mysticist, the twentieth century descendant of the hermetics.

In the following my aim is to show those characteristics of Borges' representative works based on which these writings are articulated in the vacuum of the knowledge of the non-knowledge.

On the one hand Borges' texts render possible an interpretation from which the desire to own a Name (*The Garden of Forking Paths*, *The God's Script*), the Book of books (*The Library of Babel*), or simply an old text (*Pierre Menard...*, *Searching of Averroes*), that is the need for the overcoming of the detachedness from the origin is apparent. This reading though for the sake of a comforting meaning-rendering does not pay attention to the fact that the transcendental desire present in the text, and the desire for it is reinterpreted by the (self-)ironic distance coming from the self-reflexive nature of these texts. In fact basically the area between the real and the transcendental is the place where the Borges-universe is built, and where the possibility of trespassing between the two spheres is constantly obvious. This is why the narrator-protagonists of these texts hesitate between the possibilities offered by their own stories just like the interpreter in unable to decide, for by way of any unequivocal decision the text losing its balanced position would land in the sphere of the „miraculous“ or the „realistic“, and by this expropriation it would be deprived of its constitutive plurality. Speaking of this plurality Michel Foucault states on the first pages of *Les mots et les choses* that the birthplace of his book as one of Borges' texts³. The Borges writing quoted by Foucault — *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins* (El idioma analítico de John Wilkins) — raises a possibility, which according to the French philosopher seems to be suitable

³ Michel Foucault: *Les mots et les choses*. Gallimard, Paris 1996, 7.

for the unsettling and shaking of the thousand-year old way of thinking based on the dualism of the Same and the Other. In this text of his Borges quotes an alleged Chinese encyclopedia, which classifies animals as follows: „a) animals of the emperor; b) the enbalméd; c) the suppléd; d) pigs; e) sirens; f) animals in tales; g) stray dogs; h) those who are present in this classification [incluidos en esta clasificación]; i) those who are shaking vehemently; j) those who cannot be counted; k) those who were painted with the finest brush made from camel hair; l) others [etcétera]; m) those who have just broken a vase; n) those who appear to be flies from the distance.”⁴ For Foucault the interesting point of this enumeration is shown in the fact how on the one hand it destroys, while on the other hand in the language it makes possible the common space of the meetings, and thus it suggests that underlying the traditional classifications there are still things which belonging to a certain kind of a mute cast show a completely different system of knowledge. As according to Foucault culture covers this raw fact of order with a secondary net, which may only be approached by quitting the traditional ways of language, perception and practice⁵. The alphabetical order, which is the basis and sign of systematic thinking based on the distinction of separable, easily identifiable classes or types, in the case of the „Chinese encyclopedia” destroys itself by the trick of connecting diverting elements to each other. In the final destruction of causality point h) („incluidos en esta clasificación”) and point l) („etcétera”) play the leading role, and I attribute the basic structural and semantic characteristic of every Borges’ text to the continuity of the joint presence of these. Point h) in quite a tricky way includes the whole system itself (of which it is also a constituent), and by this it makes it unnecessary, while point l), which is seemingly hidden in the row is interested in the invalidation of it, as it opens the gate for other systems it displays and hides at the same time, and promises the implementation of new possibilities on the ruins of the old order. The very same diverting movement may be observed in other writings of Borges’, if those wish to incorporate the philosophical and literature discourses (while they are simple parts of these), and at the same time they undermine the discursive area allowing their own communication, and thus they state the usefulness of other models and codes. Based

⁴ In J. L. Borges: *A New Refutation of Time*.

⁵ Foucault, *ibid*, 12.

on this duality (and on the works of Foucault) S. Molloy considers Borges' way of speaking to be appropriately described by the term „el no lugar del lenguaje”, which is come to existence by itself through the unsettling basis of a gap (hiato) only in order to be able to destroy its own narration by way of unfolding the traditional system of thought.⁶

As a metaphoric sign of the joint presence of construction and destruction the Chinese emperor mentioned in the essay *The Wall and the Books* [La muralla y los libros] allegedly ordered the construction of the Chinese Wall and the destruction of the books had been written before his reign at the same time, and one sentence of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, which is a work hiding thoughts of ars poetica from several points of view also highlights the importance of this duality: „un libro que no encierra su contralibro, es considerado incompleto” (The book which does not contain its own anti-book is considered to be incomplete). Thus we may basically agree with Irby's statement — later to be refined — which goes as follows: „The ultimate essence of Borges's texts is the infinite dialectics of dualities full of contradictions”.⁷

The elegant maintaining of the balanced position of these diverting powers within the text results in a constant, subtle vibration which renders insensible and impossible the attempt to reduce Borges' writings to any unambiguous meaning, for — as Murillo writes — this movement „is directly derived from the structure of the narrative, which paves the way for its own infinite re-structuring”.

In connection with this statement Murillo emphasises mainly the iterative structure of Borges' texts, that is, the *mise en abyme*-technique based on the endless process of the story in the story and that of the dream in the dream, which he tries to illustrate with the metaphors of „shifting mirrors” or „Chinese puzzles”.⁸ This structuring trick was considered by Borges to be so important that he mentioned it in the first place when he summarised the four basic principles of „fantastic literature”, which obviously are to be read as the self-descriptions of his own texts: 1. Work in the work. 2.

⁶ S. Molloy: *Las letras de Borges*. Editorial Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1979, 166.

⁷ J. Irby: *The Structure of the Stories of Jorge Luis Borges*. (A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of Michigan, 1962), 47.

⁸ L.A. Murillo: *The Cyclical Night*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1968, 125.

Infection of reality by dreams and irreality (the destruction of objectivity). 3. Time travel (dissolution of temporality and causality). 4. Duplication (denial of identity)"⁹ Consequently Borges' texts are not to be read as enigmatic hieroglyphs or kabbalist symbols, for as a result of their constant restructuring of meaning they also provide their self-criticism. According to Irby this is manifested in the simultaneous demonstration of the need to show the totality and the impossibility of this task.¹⁰ Most of Borges' texts seem to support this assumption, since for example the emergence and not being able to be represented of the alef in *The Alef*, and the assumed existence of the Book of books, and its inaccessibility in the *Library of Babel*, the need for linguistic understanding and its unattainability really indicate the simultaneity of the duality mentioned above. As opposed to Irby I think that the task of the text elements contrasted by him — „superior and inferior, part and whole, order and confusion, reality and irreality" — is not to demonstrate the thousand-year old metaphysical fight between „eventually and the absolute"¹¹, but the indication of the simultaneity of the above entities, that is, the termination and invalidation of the oppositions. For if similarly to Irby we may imagine these categories only as resolutely fighting parties, then in the spirit of the classical metaphysical tradition we would be faced by a constraint of decision which, by way of making the right decision would make the accessibility of the „whole truth" possible. Consequently I think that Borges' texts urge the ironic evading of such constraints of decision; this is supported also by the opinion of Murillo, according to which every Borges' work is a „disinterested play"¹², which not in the least intends to obtain the triumphal trophy of the ultimate meaning.

Although it cannot be stated that the infinite postponement of the denoted in Borges' writings is a simple negative theology or ascetical practise, which by facing the „nothing" considers the negligence of the transcendent denoted to be its main objective. In this case we would not be

⁹ Quoted by Rodriguez Monegal: „Borges, teoria y práctica." *Numero*, Montevideo no.27, dec. 1955, 145.

¹⁰ Irby, *ibid*, 166.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 289.

¹² Murillo, *ibid*, 129.

aware of that rather emphatic part of the texts which suggests the presence of transcendencies existing beside language in our language and thinking for thousands of years.

This would be that basic duality which intertwines inseparably in Borges' texts: on the one hand the emphatic incorporation of considerable part of the metaphysical tradition into the individual narratives (see point „h” of the „Chinese encyclopedia”), which distinctly asserts the presence of this tradition built into our language, and on the other hand the possibility of being distanced from this (see point „l” of the Chinese encyclopedia), which leads out of its own system in such a way that it will never allow anchoring, for each „etcétera” present in the system is an infinite shifting, which promises an endless adventure of restructuring, and a constant, critical scattering of existing systems. On the basis of all these Borges' texts may be imagined as structures which do not have a stable central point or a meaning-centre, rather they state the possibility of a multitude of potential central points. According to Derrida's relevant assumption¹³ the structure-concept having a central point is of the same age as western science, but this central point within the system not only opens, but closes the game as well, for the inversion of the elements present in the central point is prohibited. The whole history of the structure-concept is seen by him in the substitution of central points by central points, in the course of which the central point is renamed again and again; and in the history of metaphysics is nothing else than the history of these again and again renamed central points.

In this regard Borges' texts are the destructions of the history of metaphysics (and that of the heirs of this story, that is, of themselves). I would like to argue that Borges' writings are situated on an insecure area, where it is the lack of meaning that becomes the ultimate, negated denoted of the texts. This lack of meaning is by no means identical with the hermetic complex called secret-syndrome by Eco, because while the latter is saturated by the pain caused by the non-knowledge of Knowledge, Borges' writings speak in the neutral voice of the knowledge of non-knowledge.

In his study entitled *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* Worringer finds the

¹³ J. Derrida: „La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines.” In *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris, Editions du Seuil 1967, 409-428.



explanation for the inclination to abstraction in the mode of the inner attitude. He believes that this state is a mental cenophobia full of fear, with which the subject turns toward the chaotic universe. The less is the success of mankind's striving to enter into an intimate relationship with the phenomena of the outside world in the course of its mental exploration, the more powerfully he endeavoured to establish abstractions with the help of which he attempted to suppress his sense of fear, with which he tried to overcome the mental cenophobia present in him. Abstraction — according to Worringer — is the fruit of a conceptualism beyond cognition, by means of which the individual abandons the intellectual possibility of the theological world-cognition, by way of which he more and more alienates himself from the world which is becoming more and more abstract to him.

Worringer's theory usefully defines for me a creative position, which I would like to identify with the basic standpoint of Borges, and it also defines a duality — the world of created abstractions, and reality alienated from them — which according to my view Borges' texts possess as well. If we define Borges' universe as an insecure area between these two spheres, then we may define the author himself as a continuer of the medieval debate on universals, who instead of choosing realism or nominalism prefers floating between the two, and who on the one hand declares his mistrust in cognition based on causal realism, while on the other hand he considers the outbreak from this and also the immersion into the world of abstractions to be the verbalisation of a psychological trick conducting compensational tasks.

Brief interpretation of the title of Borges' 1944 volume may support the above statements. The original title — *Ficciones* — cannot be regarded as of equal value with the Hungarian translation *Narratives* [Elbeszélések], for the Spanish title is a reference to a term the background of which is constituted by a philosophical system known well by Borges. The term „*ficción*” means for Borges primarily the fiction-concept of Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of „As If”* (*Philosophie des Als Ob*), and the articulation of a world view hidden in it, its use as a volume title obviously signals the dependence of the writings of this volume on the world view, that is, Borges subordinates his writings under Vaihinger's father text.

According to Vaihinger the world has not got any inherent order, and it does not declare its own evidence either. Thus the investigating subject may never arrive at ultimate, comforting solutions, as the systems set up by him will never cover exactly the chaotic disorder of the universe. For

this reason the human mind is continuously forced to come up with different explanations of the world in order to protect itself from the flood of impressions. These world explanations — which in all cases are inaccurate, easy to confute and self-contradictory — are called fiction by Vaihinger.

„Fiction means, in the first place, an activity of figure, that is to say, of constructing, forming, giving shape, elaborating, presenting, artistically fashioning: conceiving, thinking, imagining, assuming, planning, devising, inventing. Secondly, it refers to the product of these activities: the fictional assumption, fabrication, creation, the imagined case.”¹⁴

It follows from the above that fiction is creation and mistake at the same time, that is, the knowledge of the mistake of creation. For Vaihinger the ultimate value of thinking lies not in the insistence on categories, but in the creativity of the mind, as it is able to make use of or refuse the forms set up by itself. According to Vaihinger the fictions are „instruments for finding our way about more easily in the world.”¹⁵

This pragmatic statement — in compliance with Worringer’s arguments — makes possible the interpretation of Borges’ oeuvre which endeavours to make itself independent from the desire to form a coherent theory of the philosophical lines encompassing the texts themselves, instead it tries to make them to be seen as mere verbalised fictions. By means of this Borges’ writings become readable as ones questioning their own existence, operation and effect, and also as intentionally destabilised products, which speak about their unavoidable faultiness, that is, about the thousand-year-old adventure of thinking in the voice of an ironically controlled Baroque pathos.

A good example for this is the text entitled *Searching of Averroes*, which by way of telling the story of the establishment of certain fictions declares itself to be a fiction in the Vaihingerian sense of the world as well, thus questioning and legitimating its own justification for existence by the very same gesture.

And as this writing was published not in the *Ficciones*, but few years

¹⁴ Hans Vaihinger: *The Philosophy of „As If”*. Transl. C.K. Ogden, London, 1924, 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

later in the volume entitled *El Aleph*, we may take the risk to assume that the term „ficción” has solidified from the central term of an early pragmatist philosophy onto a characteristic category of genre at Borges, which seems appropriate for the categorisation of most of his texts, that is to say the Argentine writer’s writing technique and mode of discourse functions as the *sign* of a philosophical problem. It can be explained by this that in most of his works the narration of the story is intertwined with the representation of the story about the narration, that is with the undermining of the competency of the text (and of course that of the author). In our case even the title — *La busca de Averroes* — indicates the duality, for it may be interpreted as a research conducted by Averroes, and on the other hand as an investigation for him. In fact, the intertwining of these possibilities constructs the text itself, in which Averroes, the XIIth century doctor-philosopher takes pains to translate adequately two Aristotelian concepts: tragedy and comedy. Locked up in the culture of the Islam he is unable to accomplish his work, for he inevitably misinterprets the terms when he identifies them with panegyrics and satires. He himself is not aware of his mistake, since the meanings established by him may be inserted into the structure of knowledge which fixes the limits of communication for him.

„Admirables tragedias y comedias adundan en las páginas del Corán...” (A multitude of wonderful tragedies and comedies may be found in the pages of the Koran) — Averroes summarizes his work, and by means of this gesture he ultimately legitimates the result of his endeavours, as he made it perfectly insertable into the paradigmatic system of his culture.

Averroes tries to expropriate regions unknown for him by means of language when he tries to crack the meaning of an alien reality. The meaning which was established as a result of this process may be considered as the triumphant reminder of the cognitive subject’s victory over the world, even if it is based on a mistake. The failure of Averroes is the consequence of the fact that the cultural framework, or power code which determined for him by the institution system legitimating the mentality of the Koran, accurately designated the possible directions of questions and problems, and is also indicated the semantic domain of the answers to be given to these questions and problems.

The assumption of Foucault makes Vaihinger’s fiction-concept more precise to such an extent that based on his idea the attempts of explanation for reality are not to be considered „fictions” only for the universe has not

got an inherent sense which is easy to interpret, but also because the codes regulating the practical operation of different cultures set down the „order of discourses” and its types, that is, they make possible only the declaration of seeming and temporary truths.

Consequently Averroes’ activity is destined to failure, similarly to any human endeavour which aims at the accurate cognition and representation of the world. This is realised by Borges at the end of the text by the following sentences: „Sentí que la obra se burlaba de mí. Sentí que Averroes, queriendo imaginar lo que es un drama sin haber sospechado lo que es un teatro, no era más absurdo que yo, queriendo imaginar a Averroes, sin otro material que unos adarmes de Renan, de Lane y de Asín Palacios. Sentí, en la última página, que mi narración era un símbolo del hombre que yo fui, mientras la escribía” (I felt that the work had made a fool of me. I sensed that Averroes, who wanted to imagine what drama was, even if he did not had the slightest idea of what theatre was, had not attempted to accomplish a more far-fetched goal than me, who wanted to imagine Averroes, despite the fact that I had not had more source for it than Renan’s, Lane’s and Asín Palacios’ fragments. On the last page I sensed that my narrative was the symbol of the man who myself had been when I had been writing it.) In this way Borges’ work becomes the story of failure ending with the representation of a failure, that is, a parable on the possibilities of the human praxis.

Averroes’ Aristotle-fiction, Borges’ fiction made up about Averroes, and also the fictions provided by the interpretations about this text of Borges are born as a result of the generalisation and projection into the past of momentary paradigmatic problems, and thus they are products and at the same time constituents of a cultural network. For Averroes, Borges (and for the interpreters) the past is mediated through texts — and this is why it is important that the central figure of the text is the philosopher who was respected in the medieval ages as the „Commentator”, and who by means of this may be the embodiment of a secondary message — and these texts never say what *was* or *is* in reality but they only may report about the process how the language establishes the practice of the revelation of certain meaning-values. In the light of all these Averroes’ and Borges’ failure may not assuredly be considered as a tragic failure, rather the only chance of the subject as regards the exploration of „reality”, exactly the way Vaihinger put it in his „Als-Ob” philosophy: „A knowledge is ‘fictional’; literature,

philosophy and science; tend to become one."¹⁶

Based on the above said the question is how we are able to use these concepts made up for the sake of a comfortably coherent narrative about the world; and I believe Borges' texts which represent the philosophical tradition as a network of fictive language games endeavours to find the answer for this question, skating without difficulty among the borders of the structures of thinking regulated by Eco.

¹⁶ Ibid, 90.